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### Deposited in DRO:

19 August 2020

### Version of attached file:

Published Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Oloff, Kerstin and Deckard, Sharae (2020) 'The One Who Comes from the Sea' : Marine crisis and the New Oceanic Weird in Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015).', *Humanities.*, 9 (3). p. 86.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030086>

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## Article

# “The One Who Comes from the Sea”: Marine Crisis and the New Oceanic Weird in Rita Indiana’s *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015)

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Received: 28 July 2020; Accepted: 14 August 2020; Published: 19 August 2020



**Abstract:** Caribbean literature is permeated by submarine aesthetics registering the environmental histories of colonialism and capitalism. In this essay, we contribute to the emergent discipline of critical ocean studies by delineating the contours of the “Oceanic Weird”. We begin with a brief survey of Old Weird tales by authors such as William Hope Hodgson and, most famously, H.P. Lovecraft, who were writing in the context of a world still dominated by European colonialism, but increasingly reshaped by an emergent US imperialism. We explore how these tales are both ecophobic and racialized, teeming with fears of deep geological time and the alterity of both nonhuman life and non-European civilizations, and argue that they register the oil-fuelled, militarised emergence of US imperial naval dominance. Subsequently, we turn to Rita Indiana’s neo-Lovecraftian novel, *La mucama de Omicunlé* [*Tentacle*, trans. Achy Obejas 2019], set in the Dominican Republic, as a key example of the contemporary efflorescence of ecocritical New Weird Caribbean fiction. We explore how the novel refashions Oceanic Weird tropes to represent the intertwining of marine ecological crisis in an era of global climate emergency with forms of oppression rooted in hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, and class.

**Keywords:** Oceanic Weird; marine crisis; climate fiction; blue humanities; Capitalocene; Rita Indiana; H.P. Lovecraft; Caribbean; *Tentacle*

## 1. Introduction

“Art must come out of catastrophe.”

Kamau Brathwaite

“‘Je te salue, vieil Océan!’ ... your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories.”

Édouard Glissant

The Atlantic Ocean has long been central to Caribbean literature and art. Fundamental to the emergence of the capitalist world-ecology through the slave trade, its violent history has haunted Caribbean imaginaries, and is often represented within distinctly ecogothic modes. The sea appears as a space of trauma, a “living graveyard” choked with the debris of history (DeLoughrey 2017, p. 35). Recall, for instance, the opening image in Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* of the “balls and chains” lying deep in the “womb abyss” after having been used to drown captive Africans (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 6); or M. NourbeSe Philip’s hydro-poetic re-working, in *Zong!* (Philip 2008), of the records of the trial between the insurance company and the owner of the slave ship *Zong*,

to mourn the lives of the 150 enslaved Africans cast overboard into the Atlantic; or Tony Capellán's art installation *Mar Caribe* [Caribbean Sea] (Capellán 1996) that reverberates with contemporary racialized inequality, structural violence and plastic pollution. But we might also think of examples like Alejandro Brugués's *Juan de los muertos* [Juan of the Dead] (Brugués 2010), a Cuban-set horror-comedy, in which the waters bordering Havana swarm with underwater zombies. While jarringly different in tone, the film revives a long association in international horror between figures of enslavement, the ocean as the site of terror, and predatory creatures—a tropological constellation that, within the imperial imaginary, turned on the repression of the brutal history of transatlantic violence. Caribbean imaginaries are permeated by such (sub)marine aesthetics, highlighting the long history of systemic violence and dehumanisation that was foundational to capitalist modernity, as well as criticising the monstrous aesthetics that registered and often reinforced it.

Contemporary representations of marine trauma have increasingly emphasized the intersections between this colonial history and the degradation of the oceans through pollution and warming temperatures. The past decade of Caribbean fiction has produced a noticeable efflorescence of such texts, often in gothic, SF, and Weird modes. These include Puerto Rican Rafael Acevedo's dystopian novel *Al otro lado del muro hay carne fresca* [On the other side of the wall there is fresh meat/flesh] (Acevedo 2014) in which acid rain, air pollution, and oceanic toxification reinforce and deepen pre-existing inequalities; Cuban author Erick J. Mota's *Habana Underguater* (Mota 2010), set in a flooded Havana in a world of rising oceans and authoritarian domination of oil resources; Dominican-American Junot Díaz's "Monstro" (2012), which firmly places environmental disaster within the context of what Françoise Vergès has called the "racial Capitalocene" (Vergès 2017). We are particularly interested in the Neo-Lovecraftian eco-conscious Weird strand within this surge of fiction concerned with the world's oceans. While the Old Oceanic Weird was indelibly inscribed by the ecological regimes of imperialism and its reigning ideologies, the contemporary Caribbean Weird is reconfigured for more critical purposes. Its aesthetics offer a mode both for diagnosing current ills and understanding their roots in the long afterlives of colonialism, as well as for grasping newly emergent realities.

In this essay, we want to focus on the New Oceanic Weird of Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* [translated as *Tentacle* by Achy Obejas in 2018] (Indiana 2015), a novel that employs SF, ecogothic, and Weird modes to represent compound crises, resulting in marine ecosystem distress. Indiana's turn to the Oceanic Weird is mediated predominantly via the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft, which teems with fears of deep geological time, natural immanence, and the alterity of both nonhuman life and non-European civilization. Her novel reworks the Cthulhu mythos and Lovecraft's signature "monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head" (Lovecraft 2013, p. 32). As we will demonstrate, Lovecraft's stories were profoundly embedded in the oil-fuelled, racialised emergence of U.S. imperialism, which feeds their racism and ecophobia. By contrast, the ecohorror in Indiana's novel derives from the forces driving the capitalist world-ecology (including racism and environmental degradation), exposed most clearly at periodic moments of socio-ecological rupture throughout the "Long American Century" and culminating in the epochal crisis of the neoliberal ecological regime in the twenty-first century. We argue that *La mucama's* refashioning of the Oceanic Weird is invested in revealing the legacies of colonialism and imperialism as constitutive of ecological violence in our current era of climate emergency.

## 2. The Old Oceanic Weird and US Imperialism

The sea, as "a space unexplored [. . .] offers a fleeting experience of an absolutely unknowable realm" (Harrington 2018, p. 27). It is, therefore, unsurprising that an important subcategory of the Weird focuses on oceans. As Lovecraft writes in "Supernatural Horror in Literature," the Weird elicits "a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers" (Lovecraft 2013, p. 447). Indeed, his frightening creatures usually "come from the depths of time, deep space, deep holes in the ground or from the deep sea" (Harrington 2018, p. 34). The Oceanic Old Weird is suffused with fear and loathing of the unknowable sea, which is imagined as a force of malevolent antagonism directed at ships

and sailors, or as embodying the natural immanence of death and entropy. While Jolene Mathieson has previously discussed “hypermateriality” and “wet ontology” in the Oceanic Weird through a new materialist lens, alleging that the genre troubles the limits of “earlier modes of oceanic thought within the natural and social sciences,” we take instead a Marxian approach to analyse the ways in which the genre’s aesthetics and themes mediate the violence, epistemes, and socio-ecological relations corresponding to the eco-racial regimes of capitalism and colonialism (Mathieson 2019, pp. 111, 114). The Oceanic Weird emerged within a larger tradition of ecophobic tales at the turn of the twentieth century in a world still dominated by European colonialism, but increasingly reshaped by emergent US imperialism. In this section, we elaborate on two tropes that flourished in an era when European and American powers competed for dominance in the Caribbean: monstrous octopi, which would metamorphose into the Lovecraftian anthropoid tentacular figure, and the Caribbean-centred myth of the Sargasso Sea as a “Weed World” (Hodgson 2015, p. 23).

In legends of the weed-clogged Sargasso Sea, “ships became becalmed and trapped by the weed” in an area of the North Atlantic that would later be nicknamed the Bermuda triangle (Ashley 2007, p. 460). Several late nineteenth-century American and British writers “used the Sargasso as a setting for societies of people trapped there for generations” (Ashley 2007, p. 460). At the dawn of the twentieth century, one of the most influential authors of Sargasso tales, English author William Hope Hodgson, describes it as a place of absolute loneliness, an “interminable waste of weed—a treacherous, silent vastitude of slime and hideousness” (p. 4) that eclipses humanity and enlightened rationality. Hodgson’s “From the Tideless Sea” (1906) depicts monsters of the deep lurking beneath this stagnant surface: “some dread Thing hidden within the weed” devours almost all of the crew, grabbing them one by one with its “immense tentacles whirled up into the air” (p. 20). In his subsequently published Sargasso-themed horror novel, *The Boats of the “Glen Carrig”* (1907), the tentacled creature is joined “by giant crabs, octopodes, and tentacled devil-fish, [...] giant fungi [...] trees that howl [and] [...] weed men” (quoted in Ashley 2007, p. 460). As Emily Alder observes, these “[a]nimal monsters” are so unsettling because they “reveal the limits to scientific mastery over the natural world” (Alder 2017, p. 1084). “They violate,” she continues, “existing norms and knowledge systems; they flourish in environments in which humans are unfit and cannot dominate” and disturb “a colonialist centrism structuring relationships between humans and the more-than-human world” (ibid.). The Atlantic Ocean and its Weird creatures mark the limits of capitalism’s attempts to control the submarine world.

The Old Oceanic Weird imagines the Sargasso as a depository of a secreted, miserable history which invokes the temporality of the *longue durée*—whether deep time provoking terror because it is seemingly beyond human conceptualization, or the catastrophic history of the four hundred preceding years of capitalist modernity. UK naval officer Frank H. Shaw’s “Held by the Sargasso Sea” (1908), which offers a paradigmatic condensation of imperialist tropes associated with the sea, mobilises both temporalities:

There lies in the Atlantic Ocean, far removed from all the ship routes, and shunned as the plague by sailing vessels [...] a mysterious and melancholy thing. It is called the Sargasso Sea. Columbus sighted it on his momentous voyage to the West and brought back startlingly lurid tales of its wonderful powers. [...] The sea is shut out here by illimitable tracts of loathsome weed [...] The bottles that are thrown over from sinking ships are swept towards this common refuse heap of the deep; derelicts gradually sway into this vortex [...] Not until the sea gives up its dead will the whole miserable history of the Sargasso Sea be known. (Shaw 2018, pp. 95–96)

Shaw’s invocation of Columbus situates the Weird within a colonialist tradition that imagines the Caribbean both as site of triumphal European conquest and of fearfully insurgent natural alterity that might thwart or exceed European power and epistemes. At the same time, the passage offers a prescient, if unwitting, registration of capitalism’s transformation of the ocean into trash-heap and dumping-ground, full of derelict ships, but also the detritus of the Atlantic mercantile economy, trapped within a vortex that anticipates today’s garbage patch within the North Atlantic Gyre. The rampant

seaweed reconfigures the ecophobic trope of monstrous tropical fecundity to imagine the loathsome vegetation as clogging and obstructing the technics and vehicles of maritime capitalism, thus resisting the rigid abstraction of nature. The Weird here thrives on “a truly Darwinian traumatism”, manifesting in the “disgust at formless, structureless, primordial ooze, the slime dynamics that invoke the arche-origins of life itself, a chaos of protozoan mass that dissolves all boundary” (Luckhurst 2017, p. 1054).

It is within Lovecraft’s sea horror that tentacular monsters and abyssal terrors achieve their most potent distillation, developed and refined throughout the Cthulhu mythos and its related tales of ancient underwater beings. Throughout early stories like “Dagon” (1917), “The Temple” (1920), and “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), Lovecraft introduces the motif of an ancient race of beings who dwell in the deep uncharted oceans and are terrifyingly different from humans. In “Dagon,” the ocean floor, suddenly risen above sea level, is revealed to a WWI sailor lost at sea. There, the (possibly hallucinating) sailor finds remnants of an ancient civilization dedicated to the worship of a fish-god, and catches a glimpse of “a stupendous monster of nightmares [. . .] [with] gigantic scaly arms” (Lovecraft 2007, p. 7). In “The Temple,” a German submarine officer is marooned on the seabed after his ship is disabled by unknown forces, and is driven to suicide after he enters a ruined temple and is consumed by dreadful visions of a primordial civilization (Lovecraft 2012, p. 459).

In “The Call of Cthulhu”, Lovecraft crystallizes these earlier visions into the monstrous figure of the ancient god Cthulhu, an oceanic hybrid whose “pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings” (Lovecraft 2013, p. 26) and who is prophesied to return and wreak a terrible wrath upon human civilization in the contemporary era. In Lovecraft’s racialized imaginary, the ancient worship of Cthulhu is depicted as enduring in the “evil” rites found in the supposedly primitive religions of Afro-diasporic cultures: “Voodoo orgies multiply in Hayti, and African outposts report ominous mutterings” (Lovecraft 2013, p. 30). As such, Lovecraft’s stories are saturated with “a racism so obsessive it is a hallucinogen” (Miéville 2009, p. 511). In his version of the Oceanic Weird, racist phantasmagoria is intertwined with marine ecophobia, pulsating with revulsion for the alterity of both nonhuman life and non-European civilization. For Lovecraft, the true “horror of modernity” is “the horror of ‘inferior’ races, miscegenation, and cultural decline, expressed in his protean, fecund, seeping monsters” (Miéville 2009, p. 513).

Critics have often noted that the horrors of the two world wars are central to the Old Weird, particularly in stories such as “Dagon” and “The Temple.” However, they have been less attentive to the geopolitical environmental unconscious of Lovecraftian eco-racial-phobia, which registers, even if often in displaced form, the emergence of the US as the new global hegemon in the world-ecology. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the US aggressively expanded into the Caribbean and Latin America, establishing the ecological regime of the “American Sugar Kingdom,” increasing its control over commercial sea lanes, and justifying “dollar diplomacy” through patriarchal-racist ideology. Despite Lovecraft’s narrative insistence on the primitive, his Weird monsters could be read as figuring not so much the repression or recurrence of an ancient past, as the emergence of a new present “impregnated [. . .] with a bleak, unthinkable novum” (Miéville 2009, p. 513). As Shapiro postulates from a world-systemic perspective:

the weird registers initial perceptions of what ought not to be present—i.e., capitalism in crisis—in times otherwise dominated by wealth creation and expansion, those moments when rising inequality begins to be sensed even though these social divisions have been dogmatically claimed to have been overcome. Narratives that foreground the seepage of the other, seemingly inexplicable lifeworlds and temporalities into the everyday, register the onset of larger temblors of transformation within the capitalist world-system. (Shapiro 2016, p. 241)

While Shapiro’s analysis concentrates on the rising inequality that would erupt during the Great Depression, we argue that Lovecraft’s novum also evokes the newly emergent, oil-fuelled eco-racial regime that would transform the Caribbean into “a key energy outpost for imperial powers” with



“outsized [. . .] refineries [. . .] scaled to the oceanic merchant and military networks they supported” (Bond 2017, p. 604).

As Graeme Macdonald has argued, Lovecraft’s story “At the Mountain of Madness” (1931) is replete with “fossil-terror” (Macdonald 2016, p. 132), encapsulated most explicitly in the “nightmare plastic column of foetid black iridescence” that confronts the explorers in the subterranean burrows (Lovecraft 2013, p. 278). While Lovecraft’s other tales of the Oceanic Weird offer no such wonderfully suggestive references to oil, their plots nevertheless thrive on the “problematic uncontainability of deep underground powers” (Macdonald 2016, p. 132), revolving around monstrous powers unearthed by earthquakes or discovered in a state of madness. Weird fiction is percolated by instances of ancient forces inhabiting unknown depths, animated slime (what else is oil?), and unknown energies that power travel across ages and bend perceptions of time. Indeed, the notion of geological deep time that reverberates in so many of the stories is resonant with the millions of years required to create fossil fuel. Petro-modernity harnesses “temporal eternities” in the present, since oil is composed of dead organic matter “fossilized over millions of years” (Wenzel 2017, p. 7). In other words, ancient dead life is revived in the present after aeons. These ancient “remnants of terrestrial and aquatic plants and heterotrophic organisms” (Smil 2008, pp. 58–59) have powers that are so great as to seem fantastic; the equivalent energy of 12.5 years of human labour-power is compressed in one barrel of oil (Heinberg 2014, p. 31).

Furthermore, during the early twentieth century, tentacled figures were explicitly used to refer to Standard Oil. In a political cartoon entitled “Next!” from 1904 by Udo Keppler, for instance, Standard Oil is “depicted as a giant octopus uncoiling its arms across a map of the United States and attaching its tentacles to giant statehouses, Congress, complementary industries, and—‘Next!’—the White House” (Sawyer 2018, p. 5). More broadly, tentacled creatures were employed to critique new forms of imperialism. As Michael Niblett explains, “[i]n the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became common in political cartoons in the Americas and Western Europe to use images of monstrous tentacled cephalopods to figure the reach and impact of corporate power and imperialist exploitation” (Niblett 2020, p. 12). In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis—the year that Rita Indiana’s protagonist Acilde is born—vampiric squids underwent a renaissance in the contemporary media, used to figure the tentacular reach of fictitious capital, “particularly in one American journalist’s widely-cited declaration that Goldman Sachs, America’s most powerful investment bank, resembled ‘a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money’” (McNally 2012, p. 1).

Of course, Lovecraft’s stories are not simplistically allegorical, but it is surely relevant that tentacles refer us to an oil-drenched semantic field. Petro-modernity has also warped linear conceptions of time, speeding up everyday life through (auto)-mobilisation, compressing time and space. As such, oil-horror manifests in the Oceanic Weird not only through descriptive depictions of ancient underwater powers, but also through the transcendence of temporal limitations at the level of narrative structure or teleaesthetic perception. As Lovecraft expounds in “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction” (1934), “one of my strongest and most persistent wishes [is] to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis” (Lovecraft 2012, p. 497). Indeed, in his time-travel novella “The Shadow of Time” (1934), the Yithians, an ancient race, are able to travel across aeons by using humans as hosts for their minds. After being possessed, one host finds that his “ability to distinguish between consecutiveness and simultaneousness” seems “subtly disordered,” and he begins to form “chimerical notions about living in one age and casting one’s mind all over eternity for knowledge of past and future ages” (Lovecraft 2013, p. 389). While the plots of Lovecraft’s stories describe ancient forces discovered with horror, they also mediate the energy unconscious of the emerging new age of oil, perceptible through the warping of the time–space sensorium.

That fossil-terror, hallucinogenic racism and ecophobia should frequently converge in oceanic spaces is no coincidence, if we consider the role they played in American imperialism. After the Spanish–American War of 1898, the US became a major power on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and oil began to replace fuel on US warships as the more logistically practical source of energy under conditions of modern warfare (Aoghs.org Editors 2008, n.pg.). As the twentieth century progressed, oil-fuelled maritime supremacy became ever more central to maintaining US imperial hegemony. As DeLoughrey observes, “[o]ver 60 percent of the world’s oil supply is shipped by sea, and over 20 percent of the Pentagon’s budget goes to securing it. Securing the flow of oil has been a vital US naval strategy—not to say “mission”—since the 1970s” (DeLoughrey 2019, p. 23). This context helps explain why, for so many writers of the New Weird, Lovecraft remains an important, if deeply problematic, forerunner; the genesis of the rich array of literary devices that he innovated is enmeshed in the emergence of the oil-fuelled, racist, extractivist American imperium, whose naval military force is “the biggest institutional contributor to global carbon emissions” (ibid). In the next section, we turn to Rita Indiana as an exemplary writer of the New Weird, in whose work the reactionary politics of the Oceanic Weird are refashioned for contemporary critique.

### 3. The Condylactis Gigantea and the Long Apocalypse in *La mucama de Omicunlé*

Within the more radical politics of the New Oceanic Weird, ecological crisis is often explicitly thematised, no longer mediating the imminent transition to a new oil-fuelled regime but rather the epochal exhaustion of the neoliberal ecological regime. As a mode that estranges “our sense of reality” (Noys and Murphy 2016, p. 117), the New Weird is particularly suited to addressing the changing realities of a warming planet. The uncanny totality of climate change is aptly captured in Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman’s concept of “global weirding,” understood as “a cognitive frame” aimed at refocussing “our attention on the localities within the totality of the global.” As they write, it “was intended to show us is that we are now living in postnormal times: we can no longer depend on the climatological patterns that up till now have more or less reliably structured our behaviors” (Canavan and Hageman 2016, n.pg.).

Given the crucial role of the oceans in regulating the climate, it is no surprise that the Oceanic Weird should experience a revival in this context<sup>1</sup>. In Rita Indiana’s *La mucama de Omicunlé*, the Caribbean Sea is no longer the stagnant Weed World of the early twentieth century—excessive fecundity is replaced by omnipresent death, sterility, and toxification. The sea has become “a dark and putrid stew” (Indiana 2018, p. 83) of animal cadavers and extinct species; it is a gravesite of dying reefs and non-human fauna, wracked by the intersection of compound crises in the era of late neoliberal capitalism<sup>2</sup>. The novel’s central time-travelling plot is complex, revolving around the attempt to prevent the spilling of biochemical weapons into the Caribbean Sea after a massive seaquake. In the quasi-apocalyptic future of the late 2020s, a *santera* called Esther and her helper Eric create a Yithian double in the past for an impoverished trans youth Acilde. With the help of a mystical anemone that taps into the powers of ancient gods, Acilde spawns white man Giorgio, emerging in 1991 through an underwater portal of anemones. Acilde–Giorgio, acting both in the future and in the past, is tasked with preventing the set of events that will lead to the chemical spill and subsequent annihilation of marine life.

However, the global ecological crisis depicted by the novel exceeds the poisoning of the Caribbean Sea. Over the long timespan of the narrative, marine ecosystems and their human and non-human

<sup>1</sup> One might here also mention *The Ballad of Black Tom* (LaValle 2016), in which Victor LaValle suggests that the brutal racial regime of American empire must be understood as inextricable from climate change and rising sea levels, imagining the legacies of the eco-racial regime set in place by US imperialism as transubstantiated into an unnamable oceanic threat in the future.

<sup>2</sup> All English-language citations of *La Mucama de Omicunlé* given in this essay are from Achy Obejas’ 2018 translation *Tentacle*, unless otherwise noted.

inhabitants are subjected not only to biochemical warfare, but also global warming and rising seas, coral bleaching, industrial pollution, overfishing, anomalous weather events and “natural” disasters, environmental racism, and the violence of anti-migration brutality and genocide. The climate change crisis, in short, is portrayed as emerging from the wider crisis of global capitalism as a world-ecological regime, whose impacts are unevenly concentrated in the Caribbean<sup>3</sup>. Discussing the impact of climate change in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria’s impact, Indiana notes that “[p]lacing these plagues in the future gives my reader a “safe” place from which to view them”, but that “climate change is not just something I think about—it’s already affecting the way me and my family live” (Brady 2019, n.pg.). Furthermore, as scholars rightly emphasise, “marginalized groups experience climate change effects differently from the wealthy and privileged, and this vulnerability must be adequately addressed both from a political and an ethical perspective” (Baptiste and Rhiney 2016, p. 17).

The impossibility of disentangling “social”, “political” and “environmental” histories are emphasised from the very start of the novel, even before *Weird* elements are introduced. *La mucama* opens in 2027, when the Dominican Republic is dominated by a new dictatorial regime that has ruthlessly mechanised the killing of Haitian migrants, ideologically “justified” by a viral outbreak across the border. No character internal to the narrative—not even Acilde—shows any emotion when confronted with routinized ethnic cleansing:

Acilde positions her eye and activates the security camera that faces the street, where she sees one of the many Haitians who’ve crossed the border, fleeing from the quarantine declared on the other half of the island. Recognizing the virus in the black man, the security mechanism in the tower releases a lethal gas and simultaneously informs the neighbors, who will now avoid the building’s entrance until the automatic collectors patrolling the street and avenues pick up the body and disintegrate it. (Indiana 2018, p. 9)

This opening scene situates the novel in relation to the Dominican Republic’s treatment of citizens of Haitian descent, evoking the 1937 “Parsley Massacre” on the Haitian–Dominican border, as well as the more recent, scandalous 2013 legal ruling, “La Sentencia TC 168–13”, which denationalized a large sector of the population. This specific history is overdetermined by the emergence of US hegemony, concretised through the establishment of the “American Sugar Kingdom” in the Caribbean, and repeated military interventions.

In Haiti, the 1915–1934 US Occupation brought changes to landholding patterns that dispossessed scores of farmers, transforming them into a mobile workforce employed in Cuba and the Dominican Republic in low-paying jobs. Haiti’s contemporary levels of extreme deforestation and environmental degradation are a well-documented result of over a century of US resource extractivism and economic restructuring. In the Dominican Republic, the first US military occupation (1916–1924), which followed and reinforced US investment in the sugar industry, laid the groundwork for the emergence of fascist dictator Rafael Trujillo, who was trained by the US military. After his assassination in 1961, the democratically-elected socialist president Juan Bosch was ousted by the military with the support of business elites for “harboring ‘communist tendencies’” (Horn 2014, p. 51). Bosch’s abrogated presidency forms part of the novel’s implicit context, having “come to represent in the Dominican national imaginary the country’s best hope for a break with the authoritarian past” (ibid., p. 53). This foreclosure of democratic possibility was partly engineered by US imperialism—efforts to reinstate Bosch by constitutionalist forces were countered by a second US invasion in 1965, and the launching

<sup>3</sup> Environmental historian Jason W. Moore posits that the capitalist world-system is also a “capitalist world-ecology,” which is constituted not only through the periodic reorganization of geometries of power and economy, but through the remaking of socio-ecological relations, such as food, energy, and resource regimes (Moore 2011, p. 125). He contends that the systemic cycles of accumulation corresponding to the rise and fall of hegemonic cores over the 500 years of capitalist modernity—which he elsewhere calls the “Capitalocene”—are founded in organizational revolutions not only of social relations, such as class, race, and gender, but also of biophysical natures. The Americas were integral to the emergence and development of the capitalist world-ecology, serving as the primordial site of accumulation for early modern capitalist expansion.



of Operación Limpieza by the Dominican military junta in tandem with CIA aid. As in so many countries in the southern hemisphere, the US occupation and “clean-up” operations served to reinforce authoritarianism, undergirding the rise of the racist, right-wing dictator Joaquín Antonio Balaguer.

In *La mucama*, Esther is born in the seventies, during the period of Balaguer’s regime generally referred to as “the twelve years” (1966–1978), which, as she observes, was nearly as “bloody” as the reign of the novel’s imagined future dictator, Said Bona, who wields a manipulative veneer of socialism, popular culture, Afro–Cuban religion, and anti-US and anti-Europe sentiment to his political advantage. Tellingly, in Esther’s dystopian future, the Chinese-manufactured robot that brutally disposes of Haitians is summoned “to clean up” the streets. The English phrase is used in the original text, alluding to Operation Clean-Up, even if in an altered world-systemic context in which China has overtaken the US as a hegemonic power. The opening depiction of genocide thus raises important questions about the connections during the “Long American Century” between Dominican institutionalised racism, US imperialist intervention, and both ecocidal and genocidal violence.

In its representation of an intertwined environmental and social apocalypse, Indiana’s novel might be said to continue where Junot Díaz’s “Monstro” (2012) concludes—in Díaz’s dystopian short story, set in an era of climate change that has killed off coral reefs and raised global temperatures, an infection has erupted in Haiti and is spilling over into the Dominican Republic. The virus is called “la Negrura,” literalising the frequent racialisation of epidemics and the rhetorical employment of disease in racial discourse. Well before the current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the story suggests that the forces of global capital which produce racialized, gendered inequalities and climate change also create the conditions for the emergence of global pandemics through agro-industrialisation, deforestation, large-scale animal farms, and global supply chains (Wallace et al. 2020, n.pg.). “Monstro”’s prescient understanding of the intersection of epidemiological vectors and ecological crisis is powerfully articulated through the bodily manifestation of the virus: “coral reefs might have been adios on the ocean floor, but they were alive and well on the arms and backs and heads of the infected. Black rotting rugose masses fruiting out of bodies” (Díaz 2012, p. 107).

Díaz’s story, published two years after the disastrous 2010 earthquake in Haiti, emphasizes the author’s conviction that “there is no such thing as a natural disaster” (Smith quoted in Díaz 2011, n.pg.). What holds for earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tidal waves also applies to diseases and pandemics. They, too, unfold in a context determined by global capitalism, their unequal impact on human societies determined by variances in healthcare funding, the availability of sick pay, the density of urban environments, and the weakening of immune systems by malnutrition. We might read this in relation to Françoise Vergès’ criticism of the lack of attention to racialisation in prevalent studies of the “Anthropocene.” Her formulation of the “racial Capitalocene” calls for a new methodology “to write a history of the environment that includes slavery, colonialism, imperialism and racial capitalism, from the standpoint of those who were made into ‘cheap’ objects of commerce, their bodies as objects renewable through wars, capture, and enslavement, fabricated as disposable people, whose lives do not matter” (Vergès 2017, p. 72). Similarly, Indiana’s evocation of Haitian genocide in conjunction with marine ecosystem distress indicts environmental racism, offering a pointed critique of myopic mainstream responses to climate crisis or environmental degradation that ignore the political ecology of class and race, a perspective further satirized by the character of Linda, the well-meaning, but socially oblivious conservationist heiress.

However, within *La mucama*’s wider imagination of marine crisis, the Weird is initially invested with hope for transformation. The Caribbean Sea is described as the “dark side of the planetary brain” (p. 91)—a generative site of creativity as well as of Afro–Caribbean and Taíno spirituality, a submarine repository of ancestral memory that can be accessed through oceanic submersion. The Oceanic Weird is transformed by being merged with alternative belief systems that Lovecraft would have described as “primitive”, but which the novel treats with approbation. Ancient forces are no longer activated by aeons-old “evil”, nor do they inspire terror; rather, in her work, the horror that afflicts us today is very much a modern creation, radiating out from the moment of the original colonization and conquest of

the Caribbean. The novel refashions the tentacled monsters haunting the Old Weird from ecophobic visions into positive symbols of biodiversity and symbiosis. In particular, Cthulhu is replaced by the *Condylactis gigantea*, otherwise known as the Caribbean Giant Anemone, and used to figure the anxieties of looming global environmental catastrophe.

This species of ball anemone lives near coastlines in shallow reefs, which are currently under threat from coral bleaching and fishing for “exotic” species for sale to tourists. Within their natural habitats, anemones are “common ecosystem engineers, providing microhabitats for complex assemblages of associated species” (Brooker et al. 2019, p. 2609). In the novel’s future, the anemone kept by Esther Escudero in a jar is one of the last of its kind, a signifier of species extinction that symbolises the cataclysmic loss of biodiversity in the Caribbean Sea resulting from environmental degradation and climate change. However, the anemone also signifies the “queer oceanic,” that is, the queer ecology of the ocean whose flora and fauna defy human social constructions of gender binaries and reproduction. As Humphrey notes, “sea anemones are known for varying degrees of hermaphroditism and potential asexual reproduction” (Humphrey 2016–2017, pp. 114). Anemones’ eggs can develop parthenogenetically into female offspring without fertilisation, and they can shelter sex-changing fish, such as the clownfish. Furthermore, the anemone is invested with the spirituality of Afro–Caribbean and Taíno belief systems, endowed with the powers of marine orishas and linked to Taíno myths about the sea. Indiana’s use of the anemone as queer symbol sits comfortably alongside Afro–Caribbean religious belief systems, since many Orishas “are represented as androgynous, bisexual, or multiply gendered”; Olokún, for instance, can be both male and female (Strongman 2002, p. 185).

In the novel, Santera Esther is initiated as Yemayá’s daughter Omicunlé, metaphorically called “el manto que cubre el mar”/“the cloak that covers the sea” (p. 23/p. 17). According to Cuban ethnographer Lydia Cabrera (also namechecked in the novel), Yemayá is:

Universal Queen because she is the Water, salty and sweet, the Sea, the Mother of all creation. She nourishes everyone, since the World is earth and sea, and the earth and that which lives on earth, is sustained thanks to her. (Cabrera 1974, pp. 20–21; our translation).

If Esther represents the legacy of Yemayá, the time-travelling protagonist Acilde is prophesied to become the earthly son of Olokún, who is described as more ancient than the sea itself, and a sea creature that walks backwards in time (144/105). Olokún, whose name means “owner of the ocean,” is “associated with the treasures that are hidden at the bottom of the sea” (Clark 2007, p. 62). Acilde’s body is pre-inscribed with the signs of his destiny to become Olokún’s incarnation, his head encircled with a “crown of moles.” After he undergoes his desired gender transition with the aid of the futuristic RainbowBright pharmatechnology, the anemone is fused to these moles in a religious ritual:

The new Acilde, still dazed, asked Eric what he was doing when he saw him, with a sporadic pulse, writing symbols on the floors and walls. [...] [The priest] began to pray in a sharp and nasal voice[,] ‘Ifa Olokun fe mi lo’re. Iba Olokun omo re wa se fun oyío’[, while] he joined the [stinging tips of the] tentacles to the moles on Acilde’s head. [...] The tentacles stayed put, as though with Velcro, and the marine creature’s smell supplanted the neighborhood’s garbage stink, transporting Eric back to Matanzas Bay, to the silver lights the sun set moving on the water, and a strong smell of iodine and algae infused him with the vigor he needed to finish the ritual. (p. 51, translation altered as indicated)

The pungent scent is redolent of Olokún’s cleansing power and capacity to regenerate marine life. After this Weird rite drawing on ancient powers and prayers, Acilde metamorphoses into a neo-Lovecraftian, tentacled, hybrid human–sea creature with the Yithian ability to inhabit bodies in another time, and is thus invested with the potential to change history.

Indiana’s novel inscribes the Weird within two temporal scales: the mythic temporality that emanates out from the age of the gods and the cyclical periodicity of the 500-year *durée* of colonialist capitalism. The latter is evoked through time-travel via the spiritual splitting of the central protagonist

Acilde (whose parallel selves are Giorgio in the 1990s, and Roque in the 1600s), as well as of the secondary character Argenis (who works as an artist in Giorgio's studio in Playa Bo in the 2000s, and who is transported into the consciousness of a castaway dubbed Côte de Fer on the same beach in the 1600s). In the seventeenth century, not long after the "Devastations of Osorio" (1605–1606), which forcefully depopulated the north and northwest of the island in an unsuccessful attempt by an increasingly peripheral Spain to prevent foreign settlement or trade with French, English, and Dutch smugglers, Roque and Côte de Fer's multi-ethnic band, composed of castaways, a maroon, and a Taíno, survives through the contraband trade of animal hides. The region they inhabit is a twice-exhausted commodity frontier, indelibly marked by the early sixteenth-century gold mines that nearly eradicated the indigenous population and by the sixteenth-century boom of the livestock economy that produced cowhides for the European market and the capital-intensive sugar ingenios, which relied on the importation of enslaved Africans. Drenched in cow's blood, the buccaneers hunt and tan the skins of feral cattle, a species first introduced to the island by Nicolás de Ovando in 1502, left to roam wild after the resettlement to the vicinity of Santo Domingo.

Yet, even within this ecosystem profoundly altered by early colonialism, the seas where Argenis-Côte de Fer fishes for his daily meal teem with species of marine life, a symbolic vision of oceanic plenitude which starkly contrasts that of the coastal ecotone adopted by Linda and Giorgio's environmental restoration project in the 1990s, where the fish are all but extinct. The novel's linking of the colonial era, neoliberal present, and dystopian future suggests an understanding of ecological apocalypse as long and cumulative—radiating out from the "original explosion" of the conquest period (McSweeney and Brathwaite 2005), and aggregating over successive cycles of intensification and exhaustion of commodity frontiers. Across all three time periods, the pervasiveness of misogyny, racism, and homophobia in contexts of extractivist violence and commodification repeats, charting a course from the bloody origins of primitive accumulation to neoliberal profit-making. Argenis is exploited in every era, whether as a tanner, beaten if he refuses to work unending hours, or in neoliberal times as a "Psychic Goya" in a call centre performing a racist, commodified stereotype of Caribbean spirituality reading tarot cards for North American clients. While his sexual and work relation with Acilde-Giorgio-Roque in both the 1600s and the 1990s initially seems transgressive, it is ultimately crushed by aggressive self-interest, culminating in Roque's murder of Côte de Fer. Historical alternatives to capitalism's cyclical depredations are thus depressingly scarce in the novel.

Within the novel's mythos, however, Afro-Caribbean and Taínoan beliefs provide counterhegemonic viewpoints. When Acilde is first reborn in the submarine doorway, he is welcomed by Taíno characters, Nenuco and Ananí, who herald him as one of the "men of the sea" descending from the "earth of beginnings" (p. 75). In the mythology of the Taíno, for whom fishing was an integral aspect of life, fish and water are central. The supreme spirit Yaya creates the world by emptying the contents of a calabash, which contained his son's bones, transformed into water and fish (Oliver 2009, p. 133). The animist Taíno view of the natural world differs profoundly from the capitalist view of "Nature": "[i]t is a perspective grounded on the continuity of relationships between all things, natural and cultural. In this view, the transformation of form is crucial to the interactions between beings, each assuming a form appropriate to the relationships in which it is engaged" (ibid. p. 53). The novel's evocation of Taíno beliefs is thereby invested with the prospect of an alternative to the impoverished Cartesian paradigm of nature as external to humanity.

Many writers of the Old Weird conceived of a world where the divine inhabits the everyday, often expressed through terrifying awe (Miéville 2009, p. 511). However, as China Miéville notes, "Haute Weird Fiction performs a backhanded service in reminding that there is nothing intrinsically progressive about the everyday numinous" (ibid.). While the Afro-Caribbean and Taíno-inflected Weird is represented in Indian's text as holding sacred, transformative potential, it is ultimately employed by the characters of the 2020s for selfish ends, curtailing its utopian prospects. Esther, the santera, closely associates with the dictator who brutally disposes of Haitians, her religious practice thus suborned in the service of racist violence. Furthermore, her plan to avert the chemical poisoning

of the Caribbean Sea lacks a holistic awareness of interconnected ecological crises and fails to account for the full range of “natural” disasters already occurring, such as the “Llorona”—a three-year long period of rain that destroys crops. Even more tragic is Acilde’s ultimate refusal to fulfil Esther’s plan. If in Hollywood film it is usually the lone white heroic male who saves humanity from destruction, this “Chosen One” plot is subverted in Indiana’s novel. Acilde’s individual aspiration to achieve white masculinity—and to access the luxuries and securities associated with a higher class status—trumps the protection of the commons when he renounces the opportunity to alter history and usher in a more life-making ecological regime.

The meditation on ideological interpellation embedded in the novel’s time-travelling narrative structure can be further elucidated in reference to a neo-Lovecraftian tradition of Caribbean SF that includes Agustín de Rojas’ *The Year 200*. In the Cuban author’s novel, time travellers reminiscent of Lovecraft’s Yithians seek to colonize a communist future, both to evade mortality and to restore the capitalist Empire which is declining in their own time. However, the would-be colonizers encounter an ideological barrier to their interpellation of post-capitalist subjects when their initial assumption “as to the basic constancy of the human personality” proves false and they encounter subjects no longer driven by capitalist individualism (Rojas 2016, p. 127). In Indiana’s novel, Esther makes a similar mistake in reverse, when she anoints Acilde as the chosen instrument of the island’s redemption, forgetting that he was raised within a highly unequal, individualised, hyper-capitalist society in which genocide is casually overlooked and commodification penetrates every aspect of life. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Acilde chooses his individual fate over the collective good. The lack of a collective imagination is also Esther’s weakness, her narrow path to salvation hopelessly detached from any conception of political organization-from-below.

In contrasting the optimistic subjectivities of Rojas’ utopia with Indiana’s bleaker vision of a doubly-colonized past that forecloses future possibility, it is important to understand Indiana’s pessimism as inscribed by the historical experience of US anti-communist “interventionism” in the Dominican Republic, where the left was systematically eradicated during the Cold War. Under Balaguer’s dictatorship, “[s]ome four thousand Dominicans lost their lives during the particularly intense “anti-communist” terror” (Krohn-Hansen 2009, p. 181), and many more leftists were forcefully exiled. This decimation of the left is explicitly highlighted in the novel through the fate of Argenis’ parents. His mother Etelvina was a leftist university professor belonging to the Communist Party; half her friends were killed by Balaguer’s assassins and she barely evaded the firing squad in 1975 (Indiana 2018, p. 31). Subsequently, Argenis’ parents and their circles transformed into people who lived “inoffensive lives” as dentists, insurance salesmen and veterinarians (Ibid., p. 32). Argenis’ own internalization of heterosexist and racist ideologies, and the grasping individualism of his class aspirations are indelibly shaped by the political vacuum opened by the eradication of left thought. Thus, if the novel’s past, present, and future are cruelly devoid of communal action or resistance, its vision of foreclosure must be read as mediating this specific Dominican context of the forcible repression of political possibility. At the same time, the novel’s inability to imagine a future beyond marine apocalypse or renewed authoritarianism is also a warning of the ways in which the Caribbean’s oceanic future could be riven by new forms of climate fascism, resource extraction, and geopolitical conflict if the capitalist world-ecology is not transformed. The weird spiral of its time loops incarnates the recurrent periodicity of capitalism’s crises, writ larger and more catastrophic in each recurrence.

Yet, in its very negation, *La mucama* is also an index of that which could be otherwise. In their initial call for articles, the editors of this issue invoked Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s appeal for new “sea ontologies” (DeLoughrey 2017, p. 33) that express alternative ways of thinking and representing the ocean. As DeLoughrey notes, “[n]o longer relegated to aqua nullius, the ocean is now understood in terms of its agency, its anthropogenic pollution and acidity, and its interspecies ontologies—all of which suggest that climate change is shaping new oceanic imaginaries” (p. 34). The Oceanic Weird, however, has troubled concepts of aqua nullius from its inception. Far from empty, Lovecraft’s oceans are repositories of memory, haunted by remains of the ancient sea-gods who once peopled the waters

and preserved in the customs of the allegedly “primitive” religions that threaten the supremacy of the stories’ bourgeois white heroes. Through invoking the numinous histories of oceans, Lovecraft’s fiction gestures—whether unconsciously, or with repugnance—towards non-capitalist perspectives that disrupt the paradigms of disposable nature undergirding the capitalist organization of racialized, disposable workforces, and the exhaustion of the web of life. Within the Old Weird, challenges to capitalist domination or anthropocentric epistemes of nature are perceived as profoundly terrifying. In Indiana’s revision of the Oceanic Weird, on the other hand, it is capitalism that is the true source of horror, the extinguisher of life of all kinds. Despite the pessimism of its plot, *La mucuma* offers a powerful condensation of a counter-hegemonic Oceanic ontology, expressed through its invocation of the Taínoan “men of the water” who come to us from the origins of time, precursors of a non-capitalist worldview that resists extinction. Hope is invested in the conception of water as sacred, rather than a source of commodification, as embodied in the Yoruba goddess Yemayá. So too is hope incarnated in the multi-species symbiosis of the trans boy crowned with a living anemone, symbolising the necessary interdependence of human and sea animals in any sustainable future, even if this prospect is foreclosed by Acilde’s own individual actions. As such, the utopian trace in Indiana’s novel lies in its intimation that prospects for radical transformation lie in finding alternative, non-capitalist, ways of viewing the marine world, in restoring the numinosity of the oceans and revaluing all forms of life.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, original draft preparation, and writing, review and editing by S.D. and K.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external research funding.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to thank the reviewers and editors for their helpful suggestions.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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